

Panel on Constitutional Affairs Meeting on 18 May 2009
Speaking notes at the panel presentation session

Professor AJ Hedley and Dr H Tinsley

Thank you Chairman,

We have submitted a short paper this morning by email. I am here to represent my colleagues in public health medicine to argue for recognition of the widespread involuntary exposure and harm to health in children and adolescents which is caused by air pollution.

The environment is the biggest determinant of the health of our children and indeed their health experience throughout their future life-course.

As we state clearly in our paper, Hong Kong as a social and economically advanced jurisdiction has provided much protection for maternal and child health. However we are in the process of seriously endangering some of these achievements because our air is not safe to breathe.

We are speaking from the strength of scientific evidence on harm to child health; evidence which has been generated both locally and internationally.

- It is known that pollutants damage the unborn child as well as the pregnant mother.
- In children we can show that pollution causes a silent injury with initially undetected damage to lungs and the circulatory system.
- Later it manifests as chronic respiratory symptoms and children may reach maturity, say at age 18, with permanently impaired lung growth and function.
- In later life pneumonia, heart attacks and stroke dominate the health effects which begin in childhood.

The community costs of air pollution damage to health are very high but avoidable.

- Harm to children from air pollution exposures is a cause of environmental injustice in Hong Kong and it affects the most disadvantaged (eg those in lower SEG) most of all. It seriously conflicts with our current efforts to promote exercise and outdoor activities.

In responding to the Convention on the Rights of the Child we urge the following:

- First, that the government acknowledges the widespread harm to the health of young people which is caused by air pollution.
- That the government adopts all of the WHO 2006 Guidelines on air quality and not just some of them as the basis for risk assessment, risk communication and environmental management.
- That urgent steps to taken to mitigate pollution exposures especially at the roadside and elsewhere to reduce an epidemic of child health problems.
- That a continuing programming of research and evaluation is implemented to monitor the impact of pollution on child health; demonstrate the benefits of interventions and overall achieve accountability for the welfare of young people with specific regard to environmental air quality.